



Photo: Jim Patterson/Vanderbilt

**DAVID C. WOOD IS W. ALTON JONES PROFESSOR OF  
PHILOSOPHY AND PROFESSOR OF EUROPEAN STUDIES  
AT VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY**

# The end of progress



Interview by Zan Boag



*Zan Boag: Contemporary society places great weight on the importance of progress and growth. What does it mean for a society to progress?*

**David C. Wood:** The idea of progress through enlightenment may not be as new as we think. The legions that brought straight roads and the Pax Romana to half the world did not just think they were extending Rome's tax base. Barbarians needed civilising. And yet this colonial reference sheds light on one reason for contemporary scepticism about the value of progress. It has often been used as a justification for imperial domination and conquest. More immediately, consider the pensioner being told, as his house is being demolished: "You cannot stand in the way of progress."...

Against Pollyanna views of progress there is increasing recognition of obstacles to it: unintended consequences, blowback, autoimmune response, resistance, uneven development and so on. These don't just reflect temporary set backs – two steps forward, one step back – but structural or systematic impediments to the realisation of our ends.

To these doubts about the smoothness of progress and our confidence in its inevitability, we need to add a growing unease about quite what progress means. We may doubt the *fact* of progress when basic food, health, shelter and security is lacking for so many. But when material prosperity brings unhappiness, depression and empty lives we may also ask just what progress means. And then again who are 'we'? A desperate refugee from a war zone may have doubts about the progressive direction of world history but be perfectly clear

about what 'progress' would look like. There is a strong sense in which 'belief in progress' is intimately tied to the need for hope in the direst circumstances. It would not be required that progress, locally or globally, is inevitable but rather that it must be believed to be possible.

*Why the focus on progress and growth?*

The assumption is made that progress is tied to increasing economic prosperity and that this is made possible only by growth. Growth is defined by an ever-increasing GDP. If greater happiness/life-satisfaction is a measure of progress, and is tied to economic prosperity, and if GDP is a good predictor of general economic prosperity, then the more that grows, the happier we will be. However, an increasing GDP does not necessarily translate into economic prosperity, let alone satisfaction. Every traffic accident or hospital visit increases GDP. European movements for degrowth, *decroissance*, are rooted in the idea that the perpetual growth assumption built into modern economics fails to take into account the depletion of natural capital. Hence the importance of sustainability.

*Each generation feels it has made progress from an ethical standpoint. What will future generations have to say about us and our current way of living? In other words, in which areas should we be making progress?*

The jury is out on our progress in combatting racism, slavery, and many would add speciesism... The Ferguson shooting, Hurricane Katrina, the thousands of deaths an-

**THE ANTI-SPECIESIST IS NOT INSISTING THAT GIRAFFES BE GIVEN THE VOTE, BUT THAT THEIR HABITAT BE PRESERVED.**

nually on the Mexican border, and its black prison population, make it clear that the USA is a deeply racist society. If the West has finally abolished slavery, we still import goods from China, Bangladesh and Africa produced under slave-labour conditions. The US war on unionisation, on worker safety, and on environmental regulation all testify to the impact that respect for human rights and wellbeing can have on the bottom line. Profits repeatedly trump ethics.

But this is not what future generations will complain about.

They will want to know how we could have so seriously degraded the planet's capacity to sustain life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – knowing all we know about the causes of climate change and how it could have been prevented.

*You say that speciesism is an area in which we haven't made much progress. What are the problem areas in your view?*

The problem areas? Well let's start off with speciesism itself... The case seemed plainly irrefutable. And yet 40+ years later, global meat eating has risen with growing affluence, climate change-induced species extinction continues unabated, and there has been little movement in attitudes to hunting or animal experimentation. Why so little change? Well, it could be that the arguments were not as strong as we thought... Perhaps the analogy with racism and sexism was exaggerated.

But the argument never was that we cannot or should not make distinctions between different species, or that



Photo: Daniel Dubois/Vanderbilt

---

we should be blind to the fact that 'we' are humans, but that there are some respects – such as the significance of pain and suffering – in which these differences should not matter... The anti-speciesist is not insisting that giraffes be given the vote, but that their habitat be preserved. And that cows not be bred and slaughtered for human food. And that chickens not be debeaked and kept for brief lives in small cages... The critic of speciesism says that we cannot, however, continue to favour our own species in the ways that we do without hypocrisy and inconsistency. The failure is one of logic, or imagination or moral sensibility.

Speciesism is just one of the areas in which progress has been disappointing. We mentioned climate change, and our ability to head off future disaster. There are many others. Derrida's list of the ten plagues of the New World

Order in *Spectres of Marx* was a good start: unemployment, flawed democracy, ruthless economic war, market failures, foreign debt, the arms industry, nuclear weapons, ethnic war, growth of super-power states, international law. And when I suggested to him that global warming be added as an eleventh plague, he readily assented.

It is obviously tempting to try to isolate one or two deep causes for these various problems: commodification, *Machenschaft*, greed, testosterone...

If I were to venture my own contribution I would single out perverse incentives... The pursuit of profit is not in itself a bad thing, but when harnessed to the military-industrial complex it creates a perverse incentive structure that favours war over peace, externalisation of costs – such as dumping toxic waste – a food industry that delivers unhealthy bodies to the

---

pharmaceutical-medical complex, a judicial system that feeds the prison industry, the corruption of the democratic process, short-termism and so on. When the outcome of these perverse incentives – for example environmental degradation – is such as to offer further opportunities for profit such as re-construction after bombing campaigns, clean-up of oil spills and carbon sequestration schemes, it may even seem like a confirmation of the economic system. Perverse incentives create more opportunities. But this is like encouraging diabetic diets because hospital treatment raises the GDP. If the aggregate consequence of perverse economic incentives is the creation of a world no longer able to sustain life as once it could, it would become clear that the consequences of perversity cannot just be fed back into the system, like swill to pigs.

*You mentioned that future generations would want to know how we could have turned a blind eye to environmental degradation. How have we reached the point where the degradation of the planet is taken as a given?*

You are right, there has been a shift in recent years from trying to prevent climate change to coming up with ways of coping with it. Why? Much of what will happen is already in the pipeline and cannot be prevented. And there is little confidence in post-Kyoto efforts to limit carbon emissions through international agreement.

How have we reached this point? There are many factors at play. National interests repeatedly trump concerted

---

global efforts... Myopic leaders were in part genuinely reflecting public worries about jobs and declining prosperity, and a commitment to the national interest. There was a general privileging of the short-term over the long-term, again with *some* justification... And then there is the discrediting of science, the pernicious construction of false debates about climate change. If there is a failure of imagination, there is also a failure of will, equally understandable.

Many people, given the information, ask: but what can I do? Followed by despair and then resignation. For it may seem that nothing I do, or my friends and family, or even my community, will save the planet. I may engage in symbolically significant practices (cycling to work, recycling my waste), but unless everyone else does the same, it will make no tangible difference. And at this point, the limits of collective agency weigh heavily. We just do not see how to organise a global *We* that could turn things around...

If individual symbolic practices are better at feeding the soul rather than actually healing the planet, there really is work to be done in devising supplementary economies, incentive structures, alternatives to sheer profit, for this might just make a difference.

Emmys and Oscars honour media activity. Ecos could honour environmental heroes; their faces could be carved on a virtual Mount Rushmore. At the same time, lawyers could get to work prosecuting CEOs of environmentally toxic corporations for crimes against humanity, criminal negligence, et cetera.

---

*What do we need to do to turn this around?*

What do we need to do to turn back environmental degradation? We need first to recognise the depth of the problem, beginning with the words 'we' and 'do'. As I see it the test of something worth doing here is that it might contribute to a non-linear event, a tipping-point that would make a dramatic difference. Everything else will be too little, too late. New honours systems and legislative creativity would be examples of this. The use of the Internet to generate new forms of political mesh-working would be another. And after chaos theory, who knows what impact one more driver-turned-cyclist might make?

*Proponents of progress have asserted for the last 300 years that the human condition has improved over the course of history and will continue to improve. However when looking at Derrida's ten plagues – eleven counting your suggestion to include global warming – it would appear that human wellbeing may not continue to improve, instead it could well decline over the coming decades. Are we faced with the end of progress, at least insofar as an increase in human wellbeing is concerned?*

Let us try a little scenario thinking, in which we imagine possibilities before assessing how likely they are to occur. One such possibility, as I have suggested before, is an age of barbarism, assuming we have not already entered it. Assume for a moment that climate change is uneven in its impact, affecting poor people and those in exposed areas more than others, forcing mass

**THERE IS NOTHING TO PREVENT THE  
BARBARISM SCENARIO THAT SURELY  
WOULD BE THE END OR SUSPENSION  
OF PROGRESS.**

migration to escape war, famine and disease. Assume too that relief agencies are overwhelmed, and increasingly underfunded – in fact this describes Ebola in Liberia, this year. And that there is no shortage of automatic weapons and angry young men. Finally, assume that privileged countries attempt to seal their borders and tighten oppression of their own poor and dispossessed to insulate themselves from the direct impact of a worsening global situation. This is a recipe for the emergence of roving bands of militias and the collapse of even the flawed international order we now have... Or, think of the same without the roving bands – just the reluctant acceptance of mass disease, famine and displacement, amidst the collapse of the global economy. These scenarios are not too far fetched in Syria, in Iraq, in Sudan – where comfortable lives have become distant memories. The global version of this scenario is based on the idea that under conditions of real scarcity, while some humans may demonstrate remarkable compassion, many others turn just as easily into rats faced with a shortage of cheese and turn on each other. A less-than-seductive version of becoming-animal. These are just a couple of scenarios. Are we faced with ‘the end of progress’?

Levinas once said it was of the utmost importance to know whether we were being ‘duped by morality’. What

is sadly clear is that there are conditions – war being the prime example – in which morality, by and large, goes out the window. We hope and imagine that such conditions will only ever be temporary, transitory, but few believe that there is any guarantee of this, that human life shelters under some sort of moral umbrella, let alone divine protection. There is nothing to prevent the barbarism scenario that surely would be the end or suspension of progress.

It is admittedly possible for such an age to co-exist with small islands of highly privileged humans with the clout and gold to continue an affluent ‘gated’ lifestyle. But only its perfumed members would dare to call this progress.

Now to the question of the plausibility of such a dystopic scene. In my view, we are in fact set on a course in which mass migrations and famines are extremely likely. The current displacements of people (e.g. in Syria) may well be harbingers of this future, and if we set aside ethical inhibition to the imagination, as history so often has done, then an age of barbarism is far from far-fetched...

Here I want to bring together Derrida and Che Guevara. Derrida often talks of the ethical importance of thinking the impossible. And Che Guevara put it nicely when he said: “Be realistic: demand the impossible”. The argument is simple: we need to pursue the impossible to avoid the unthinkable – what I have called a

new barbarism. The *impossible*? I mean changes in our habits, values, priorities... that we are reluctant to even contemplate or believe ‘possible’, let alone necessary. Many such changes are indeed unpalatable if we think that business-as-usual is an option. But once we are convinced that it is not, we might be willing to change...

Suppose then that when we think about things seriously we find ourselves entertaining apocalyptic thoughts. These could take a number of different forms – and here I am elaborating my response to one of your earlier questions. Distinguishing these forms will touch on the different senses that ‘progress’ and its opposite, can have:

1) Material progress will continue, more or less as before, with some challenges, but what it means to be human – or what we think it means – will have changed dramatically. In shorthand: material progress, spiritual oblivion;

2) Homo sapiens will continue to expand but civilisation and its promise will give way to general barbarism: war, disease, injustice. It is a Hobbesian world in which life is “Solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”;

3) Climate change will have a devastating and decimating impact on the human and non-human populations of the planet, and on the broader systems that sustain life on Earth.

As a boy I remember smiling condescendingly at the prophets of



---

doom who would parade around Hyde Park wearing sandwich boards declaring the End of the World. No doubt personal despair can easily be projected onto the planet or the cosmos. And apocalypse fatigue all too quickly sets in. The danger is that when the wolf actually appears on the horizon, the boy who cried “wolf” once too often will not be able to arouse the villagers after so many false alarms. When Derrida wrote: “The future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger”, there seemed to be a touch of hyperbole about his remark. Moreover it seemed as if it could have been made at any time in history. What seems at least distinctive about the present age is that the apocalypse is incalculably calculable – we can put a finger on the point – a two degree rise in global temperature – after which disastrous system destabilisation will open up, even as we cruise to yet warmer heights.

These three scenarios might seem ‘extreme’, or ‘alarmist’. It would be comforting if they were. And indeed the scientists’ dire warnings may prove wrong. Man’s ingenuity may spawn a panoply of just-in-time techno-fixes. Gaia may heal herself. The Second Coming may put things right. I do not have an apocalyptic disposition, but the dawn of the Anthropocene means that, without idealising it, a certain evolved balance of life on Earth has been broken, that accelerating and unpredictable change is now on the

---

cards, and in no way can these changes be expected to bear our interests in mind.

*We’ve spoken about the problems with progress, with where humans are heading. Is there a bright side? What can individuals – those reading this interview – do to implement some sort of positive change in the world? How can they right the ship, so to speak?*

What is to be done? None of these scenarios tell us to sit on our hands. But we do perhaps need to come to terms with what significant ‘action’ looks like here. With some hesitation – they overlap a lot – I would distinguish three different kinds of action: instrumental, existential and symbolic. The most familiar is instrumental action. Whether we think of the danger spiritually or materially, the levers of change, if indeed there are any at all, seem remote. To expand our earlier list, candidates for the *one root cause* of our difficulties include technology, machination, capitalism, the free market, commodification, the military-industrial complex, and Wall St. All point to ways of organising relations between humans and between humans and the Earth: patterns of exchange and extraction, modes of production. I suggested before that the trouble lay in the operation of perverse incentives.

We may begin by wishing we were in a position of power that gave us access to the levers of change, but this is of course a fantasy. The ‘power’ of those in

“As a boy I remember smiling condescendingly at the prophets of doom who would parade around Hyde Park wearing sandwich boards declaring the End of the World.”

---



# DAVID WOOD

**SUPPOSE THEN THAT WHEN WE THINK ABOUT THINGS SERIOUSLY WE FIND OURSELVES ENTERTAINING APOCALYPTIC THOUGHTS. THESE COULD TAKE A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT FORMS:**

**1) MATERIAL PROGRESS WILL CONTINUE, MORE OR LESS AS BEFORE, WITH SOME CHALLENGES, BUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN – OR WHAT WE THINK IT MEANS – WILL HAVE CHANGED DRAMATICALLY. IN SHORTHAND: MATERIAL PROGRESS, SPIRITUAL OBLIVION;**

**2) HOMO SAPIENS WILL CONTINUE TO EXPAND BUT CIVILISATION AND ITS PROMISE WILL GIVE WAY TO GENERAL BARBARISM: WAR, DISEASE, INJUSTICE. IT IS A HOBBSIAN WORLD IN WHICH LIFE IS “SOLITARY, POOR, NASTY, BRUTISH, AND SHORT”;**

**3) CLIMATE CHANGE WILL HAVE A DEVASTATING AND DECIMATING IMPACT ON THE HUMAN AND NON-HUMAN POPULATIONS OF THE PLANET, AND ON THE BROADER SYSTEMS THAT SUSTAIN LIFE ON EARTH.**

---

power rests largely on their operating 'within the system'; there may not be any big levers to move that would change the course of the global economy. The train may not be driverless, but if there is a driver he cannot jump track, and if he could he would cease to be the driver. It was just such a frustration with agency in the shape of Nietzsche's Will to Power... that led Heidegger to speak instead of 'preparing the way'.

What might this mean? Preparing the way can be understood quasi-instrumentally and then also existentially and symbolically. Instrumentally, if as we suggested before, we take non-linear change seriously, and if our technologies and lifestyles can have tipping points as well as the climate, then it may well be worth doing ordinary good things that could lead to a tipping point, even if understood linearly they do not hold out much promise. Switching to public transport might encourage others to do the same which might generate the critical mass necessary for a game-changing new investment – new track, new trains, new stations. Think too of installing solar panels, attending only [video] conferences, refusing to procreate. We do not need to be assured of results for it to be rational to pursue

possibilities for which our actions might prove critical. Many of the choices we might call existential or symbolic will appear here too.

By existential action I mean that whether or not it promises direct or indirect efficacy there is great attraction in taking up an anticipatory way of life – performing the change you want to see – as best one can. Think of movements like Voluntary Simplicity, or Back to the Earth.

There are snares and illusions here too. Small farmers drive thirsty pickup trucks, and lose the benefits of urban density. Many existentially satisfying choices are either parasitic on wasteful practices – dumpster diving – or in other ways cannot be universalised, even if they make their point. They may seem to be wistful indulgence, feeding a beautiful soul, rather than a serious contribution to the future. But personal efforts to live differently, to live lightly, and indeed to live well are not to be discounted. The example may move others to re-imagine their own lives. Living well is not just about frugality, turning down the AC, but celebrating existence itself especially in response to the elemental, a cousin of Heidegger's *Fourfold*.

Finally 'preparing the way' can take on many symbolic forms. To live one's life in the light of a certain ideal – as sacrifice, as resistance, as defiance, pursuing lines of flight, as celebration, as a work of art, dedicated to sharing and community, imagining other ways of being, experimenting with flourishings of all sorts, being a writer or an artist – all these possibilities highlight life and individual/collective actions and practices in their symbolic dimension. And this whether or not directed at preventing, resisting or accommodating climate change. You can sing about not needing a weatherman to know which way the wind is blowing, or you can just sing. All of these symbolic options can be turned to address the collapse of civilisation. The orchestra that kept on playing as the Titanic went down may have had their foolish heads in the sand, but they may have been defiantly performing the human in difficult circumstances. Heidegger's *Contributions* may be the philosophical equivalent of such a gesture.

All this is to say that even as we can already hear the rapids up ahead, there is much to be done. The prospect of disaster is no excuse for sitting on our hands. ▣

**David C. Wood** is W. Alton Jones Professor of Philosophy and Professor of European Studies at Vanderbilt University. His interests lie in time, the philosophy of nature and 'post'-deconstructive continental philosophy. He is the author of many books including *Thinking After Heidegger* and *The Step Back*.